

INNOCENCE OR IGNORANCE?:
CHILDHOOD AS A HOME FOR PURITY AND FANTASY

David Eusebio

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davideusebio@my.capilanou.ca

Dorfman and Mattelart's essay "Introduction: Instructions on How to Become a General in the Disneyland Club" presents an intriguing paradox regarding the perception of childhood. They argue that adults hide harsh elements of the world from their children because they have been conditioned to preserve their innocence, yet the ideas associated with childhood innocence have been constructed by the adults.¹ These notions are not only endorsed by the vox populi, but also reflect the values of corporations, namely Disney. While Dorfman and Mattelart criticize the evangelism of the "Disneyland Club," they do not present a solution for parting from this societal contradiction. This begs the question: how was the concept of "childhood innocence" formed and why do we preserve this innocence? This paper will trace the origins of childhood innocence from the seventeenth century up until the mid-twentieth century. I will examine how childhood innocence, which has been shaped by evolving ideologies and new technologies, has been preserved. I will also analyze the effectiveness of these methods from multiple points of view and answer the question: should we preserve childhood innocence? My findings reveal that childhood innocence must be altered to address taboo subject matter that children have been exposed to in our day and age, for the concept has eschewed societal issues and the experiences of those in the lower-income strata, as well as many minority groups, for far too long.

The innocent child is a Western ideology that did not exist until the seventeenth century. Until then, children were perceived to be "faulty small adults ... in need of correction and discipline."² In Christian theology, it was believed, especially among Catholics, Augustinians, and Calvinists, that children were born sinful and were in need of salvation. In particular, Calvinist theology enshrined that children were more "sinful and sexual ... than adults."³ This

¹ Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart, "Introduction: Instructions on How to Become a General in the Disneyland Club," in *Media and Cultural Studies: KeyWorks*, ed. by Meenakshi Gigi Durham and Douglas M. Kellner (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 127.

² Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1998), 8.

³ Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: NYU Press, 2011), 4, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt9qgj4w>.

belief aligned with the prevalence of punitive, adult control, as well as the “surveillance of children in church.” Davis acknowledges that the tradition of children leading a “commanding role” is also enshrined in Judeo-Christian scripture.⁴ The former notion was illustrated in the works of many pre-Renaissance painters who often depicted children with adult-like features beside a motherly figure (see fig. 1 and fig. 2); she is the Madonna or the Virgin Mary.



Figure 1. *The Vysehrad Madonna of the Rains*, 1360, <https://www.art.com/products/p34960866946-sa-i9378789/the-vysehrad-madonna-of-the-rains-c1360.htm>; oil painting



Figure 2. Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Crevole Madonna* 1283-1284, <https://www.art.com/products/p14196395-sa-i2945471/duccio-di-buoninsegna-crevole-madonna-c-1284.htm>; oil painting.

While these depictions were ubiquitous, they were forgotten by the height of the Renaissance when paintings of infants were beautified. Raphael and Filippino Lippi embraced the tranquility of children in their paintings while perpetuating the Madonna trend (see fig. 3 and fig. 4).

⁴ Robert A. Davis, “Brilliance of a Fire: Innocence, Experience and the Theory of Childhood.” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45, no. 2 (May 2011): 383, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9752.2011.00798.x.



Figure 3. Raphael, *Sistine Madonna*, 1513-1514, <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-sistine-madonna/CgEiMJRg7ZS6DA?hl=en>; oil painting.



Figure 4. Filippino Lippi, *The Virgin and Child with Saint John*, 1480, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/filippino-lippi-the-virgin-and-child-with-saint-john>; oil painting.

This was a significant turning point; no longer would grotesque depictions of infants be accepted. However, the Renaissance did not create childhood innocence; art historians suggest that the changing depictions of children during this era reflected “the discovery of a natural truth” among artists.⁵ The following era would establish childhood innocence: the Romantic era.

British, portrait painters from the eighteenth century pioneered childhood innocence, including Reynolds, Gainsborough, and Raeburn.⁶ It was also apparent in eighteenth century literature. Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), an essay on education and humankind, praises the inherent innocence of the child.⁷ Cox argues that, by condemning the corruption of society, Rousseau “elevates childhood to a special place of innocence ... and turns childhood into a central part of his programme for social renewal.”⁸ Higonnet emphasizes that childhood innocence was not discovered in the eighteenth century; it was an invention that invoked

⁵ Higonnet, 8.

⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁷ Kerry Robinson, *Innocence, Knowledge and the Construction of Childhood: The Contradictory Nature of Sexuality and Censorship in Children’s Contemporary Lives* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 43. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02755a&AN=cul.b1333107&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

⁸ Roger Cox, *Shaping Childhood : Themes of Uncertainty in the History of Adult-Child Relationships* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 64. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02755a&AN=cul.b1401756&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

“anxiety, resistance, and ... innovation.”⁹ The image of the Madonna was recuperated into a modest, motherly figure who would embrace her precious newborn (see fig. 5 and fig. 6).



Figure 5. Joshua Reynolds, *Lady Elizabeth Delmé and Her Children*, 1777-1779, <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.102.html>; oil painting.



Figure 6. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Baillie Family*, 1784, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gainsborough-the-baillie-family-n00789>; oil painting.

The adorable depictions of children expanded beyond oil paintings. In her children's books, Kate Greenaway mirrored the paradigms of eighteenth century portraits, but also fused Romanticism into her character's clothing and set the stories in the countryside which was reminiscent of rural, pre-industrial England (see fig. 7).¹⁰



Figure 7. Illustrated by Kate Greenaway, *Mother Goose or the Old Nursery Rhymes*, Urbana IL: Project Gutenberg, 2007. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/23794/23794-h/23794-h.htm>; drawing.

⁹ Higonnet, 193.

¹⁰ Ibid., 51.

Art historians recognize the impact these new depictions had in constructing childhood innocence. Higonnet posits that illustrations of children were associated with maternity and became catered toward feminine audiences. This allowed the illustrations to be interpreted in multiple ways, attracting both conservative and progressive spectators.¹¹ Garlen suggests that these images were fueled by nostalgia for the previous century which also “incite[d] parental anxiety” toward the changes in society.¹² She suggests this anxious feeling stemmed from the desire to protect children from violence and immorality upon viewing these images which portrayed a heavenly scene.¹³

As popularity grew, these illustrations spread and innocence became the primary distinction between children and adults. By the mid-nineteenth century, childhood and innocence had become inseparable; innocence defined childhood in the Western world, especially in America.¹⁴ Around the turn of the century, the prevalence of children was supported by the accessibility of photography.

Higonnet claims that the purpose of photography was to “give parents a better chance to identify and reclaim children” by creating positive identities associated with family values.¹⁵ Her perspective connects with Barthes’ theory of the photograph. He describes photography’s emotional impact as an “umbilical cord [that] links the body of the photographed thing to [one’s] gaze.”¹⁶ The inherent link of photographs to memory nurtures a stronger form of nostalgia upon

¹¹ Higonnet, 39.

¹² Julie C. Garlen, “Interrogating Innocence: ‘Childhood’ as Exclusionary Social Practice.” *Childhood* 26, no. 1 (Feb. 2019): 55, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edb&AN=134311799&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴ Robin Bernstein, “Let Black Kids Just Be Kids,” *The New York Times*, July 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/black-kids-discrimination.html>.

¹⁵ Higonnet, 80.

¹⁶ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. by Richard Howard (New York: Hill & Wang, 1982), 80-81. https://eclass.uoa.gr/modules/document/file.php/PSPA254/Barthes_Roland_Camera_Lucida_Reflections_on_Photography.pdf.

seeing a photographed child. Not only does it become associated with childhood, but it also allows the “less-than-ideal moments” to be excluded from the memory that is captured.¹⁷ Consequently, religious doctrine was inverted according to the cultural mandate; Christian children were no longer considered born in sin.¹⁸ Building on Foucault’s argument that Christianity is interlaced with family, Duschinsky suggests that adhering to the popular perspective of childhood innocence was “fundamental in creating the modern subject-position of the protective social authority,” just as condemning children was used to maintain authority before childhood innocence was invented.¹⁹

Paintings, drawings, and pictures helped articulate the childhood innocence toward the twentieth century. As Neustadter notes, these images finalized the ideal attributes associated with childhood throughout the Modern and Postmodern Eras: “imagination, unselfconsciousness, and a closeness to nature.”²⁰ The transition is clearly positive. Children were beginning to be appreciated in society and seemingly more beloved than in the pre-Renaissance era. So, how did the Western ideology of childhood innocence escalate to a state of emergency, as presented by Dorfman and Mattelart? To answer this question, we must examine how childhood innocence prevailed in the new millennium.

Meyrowitz posits that print media was crucial to spreading, as well as preserving, childhood innocence in the twentieth century.²¹ Magazines were ubiquitous at the turn of the century as a result of innovations in print media. Frederic Eugene Ives invented black-and-white,

¹⁷ Higonnet, 89-90.

¹⁸ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 4.

¹⁹ Robbie Duschinsky, “Childhood Innocence: Essence, Education, and Performativity,” *Textual Practice* 27, no. 5 (2013): 770, doi:10.1080/0950236X.2012.751441.

²⁰ Roger Neustadter, *The Obvious Child: Studies in the Significance of Childhood* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009), 72.

²¹ Joshua Meyrowitz, “The Adultlike Child and the Childlike Adult: Socialization in an Electronic Age,” *Daedalus* 113, no. 3 (July 1984): 47n28. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjsr&AN=edsjsr.20024926&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

halftone printing, its photomechanical process superseded wood engraving. The following decade introduced colour into the technique. Not only did this expedite printing, but it enabled publishers to easily include images with their text-based content, including articles, poems, short stories, and written advertisements.²² Among the various illustrators, Jessie Wilcox Smith pioneered the depiction of children within a variety of lifestyles. Inspired by Greenaway's artistic sentiment and nostalgic portrayals, Smith imitated Greenaway's style in her work.²³ Images of children were everywhere in magazines. Higonnet observes flipping through various, general-interest magazines to discover children portrayed in the following advertisements: Macintosh computers, Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance, Évian mineral water, British Airways, Ford, Baker Furniture, and The Breast Cancer Research Foundation. By portraying children, the products became associated with quality and perfection which has become "one of our [Western] culture's most ideal ideals."²⁴ The charm of children has also been practiced in photography where children project a specific, wholesome value associated with family. By selecting what is captured, the photographer chooses the perfect portrayal of their homelife in the comfort of their home, as well as their friends and colleagues when those images are shared. Consider the holiday greeting card: at the height of its popularity, it was required that families include photos of their children. Photos of the parents, or even the family, became obsolete. It was clear: children's innocence represented family innocence.²⁵

Faulkner stresses that this shift has introduced a tabula rasa in society's perception of childhood. The innocent child satisfies a yearning felt by society which expunges other

²² Higonnet, 60.

²³ Ibid., 61.

²⁴ Ibid. 91-92

²⁵ Ibid. 93.

perceptions of childhood.²⁶ The positive perception operates to construct, as well as preserve, childhood as “spatially stable sphere through which adult Western subjectivity manages anxiety about its vulnerability to social, economic, and environmental change.”²⁷ This has been bolstered by the sociocultural and political construction of the taboo in Western ideology. Certain topics, such as violence, death, poverty, and politics, have been constituted as “difficult, particularly in relation to children,” which has resulted in censoring content for children.²⁸ Robinson identifies two spheres of influence for adults and children: the public and the private spheres. The public sphere, the events of the world, is reserved for adults whereas the private sphere, the home of the nuclear family, regulates the information retained by the child.²⁹ This influenced institutions, such as the establishment of censorship boards which included the “rigid, prudish, Motion Picture Production Code.”³⁰ Therefore, childhood innocence was reinforced by “the magical, fairytale, ubiquitous quality of the media ... which could instantaneously transmit dreams and beliefs.”³¹ In literature, children entered other worlds, falling down rabbit holes, accessing secret passages, speaking with animals, venturing into the mystique, and returned home safely.

These techniques in controlling the sociocultural and political aspects of children’s lives have solidified the idealistic, fantastical quality of childhood innocence. However, the efficacy of preserving innocence in regards to its success, as well as its ethics, has been in dispute. Two, opposing crises have emerged in the past century regarding childhood innocence: childhood

²⁶ Joanne Faulkner, “Vulnerability of ‘Virtual’ Subjects: Childhood, Memory, and Crisis in the Cultural Value of Innocence,” *SubStance* 42, no. 3 (Jan. 2013): 128, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsjrs&AN=edsjrs.24540728&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

²⁸ Robinson, 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰ Marie Winn, “What became of childhood innocence?” *The New York Times Magazine* 25 (Jan. 1981): 68, <https://www.nytimes.com/1981/01/25/magazine/what-became-of-childhood-innocence.html>.

³¹ Ariel Dorfman, *The Empire’s Old Clothes: What the Lone Ranger, Babar, and Other Innocent Heroes Do to Our Minds*, E-Duke Books Scholarly Collection (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 175, <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02755a&AN=cul.b1326077&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

innocence has been tainted by the growing accessibility of content and the exploitation of childhood innocence has commercialized the concept while limiting the knowledge of the world which has become essential for children's development.

Television complicated control over the private sphere, causing children to indulge in the issues of the world. In the sixties and seventies, children could easily be exposed to issues of the time, such as the Vietnam War, the Watergate Scandal, and world hunger. Winn claims that parents were "appalled to find that their 'innocent' children were losing their innocence rapidly."³² In essence, there has been a rise in concern that the carefree, delightful childhood is fading because of the growing exposure children have to world issues. The slew of content has increased tremendously since the age of the internet, exposing children to subject matter they may not be prepared to see as a result of this carried ideology of preserving their innocence. For instance, since the pandemic, numerous news outlets have reported videos of people dying going viral on TikTok, a video-sharing, social media app, in which over thirty percent of its users are aged ten to nineteen.³³ But, as Higonnet posits, childhood innocence "is now in jeopardy not just because it is being violated, but because it was seriously flawed all along."³⁴

The exploitation of childhood innocence for commercial benefit has aggravated many scholars and provides further context into Dorfman and Mattelart's critique. Faulkner insists that innocence "satisf[ies] the definition of a commodity fetish furnished by Marx," for children have become a potent inducement for persuading people to buy products.³⁵ The child has become objectified for the purpose of capital benefit. Connecting to Dorfman and Mattelart argument,

³² Winn, 68.

³³ J. Clement, "U.S. TikTok users by age 2020," Statista, App Ape, Nov 6, 2020, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1095186/tiktok-us-users-age/>.

³⁴ Higonnet, 194.

³⁵ Joanne Faulkner, "The Innocence Fetish: The Commodification and Sexualisation of Children in the Media and Popular Culture," *Media International Australia, Incorporating Culture and Policy*, no. 135 (May 2010): 112. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.capilanou.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsilc&AN=edsilc.129276536203412&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

Walt Disney World uses this tactic to attract tourists who seek to prolong childhood innocence, but also to provide a form of escapism for adults.³⁶ Furthermore, criticism is concentrated on the fact that childhood innocence has stemmed from adult control. As the Church adapted its doctrine for control, adults define childhood innocence to adhere to their values and perceptions. Combined with fetishization, it becomes clear that childhood innocence benefits adults more than children. Do you believe *Pocohontas* (1995) was made for children? Perhaps, but not without the influence of adults who aged the character by seven years and whose illustrations were “inspired by adult sex appeal, especially the allure of fashion supermodels Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell.”³⁷ As such, innocence becomes a form of repression. It represses adult desires that, when permitted and strategically integrated, can be fulfilled through infantile depictions in media because children are denied agency of the content they watch, nor the content that is created for them.³⁸

Another critical flaw with the concept of childhood innocence is its disregard for race, gender, and those in the lower-income strata. As Higonnet explains, these images of children have been “so dominantly white that race did not even seem to be an issue.”³⁹ Garlen insists that the ideal circumstances presented by childhood innocence were “not in the realm of possibility for anyone but White elites” because children experiencing “poverty, abuse, or discrimination are always already excluded from innocence.”⁴⁰ Stockton posits that “experience is still hard to square with innocence, making depictions of streetwise children, who are often neither white nor

³⁶ Garlen, 58.

³⁷ Higonnet, 154.

³⁸ Lisa Farley. *Childhood beyond Pathology: A Psychoanalytic Study of Development and Diagnosis*. SUNY Series, Transforming Subjects: Psychoanalysis, Culture, and Studies in Education (New York: State University of New York Press, 2018), 14. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat02755a&AN=cul.b1551996&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

³⁹ Higonnet, 119.

⁴⁰ Garlen, 62-63.

middle-class, hard to square with ‘children.’”⁴¹ Even when African-American children were illustrated for advertisements in the early-twentieth century, it continued to be a “tool of racial dominance.” Bernstein compares two advertisements for Fairbanks soap: one “whose mascot was a serene white child dressed in fancy clothes” and one with “[B]lack, nonchildren [sic] toil[ing]” (see fig. 8).⁴²



Figure 8. Two early 1900s advertisements for Fairbank soap: (left) featuring African-American children; (right) featuring a white girl. Made by The N. K. Fairbank Company, 1900 and 1911, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/26/opinion/black-kids-discrimination.html>.

Not only do these advertisements belittle the African-American community, but stereotypes are embodied in classic cartoons, such as Bugs Bunny and Mickey Mouse. Their white gloves, sardonic facial expressions, and melodic body language and movement mimic the stereotypes portrayed in minstrel shows. This also persisted in children’s toys.⁴³

Negative experiences are excluded from childhood innocence, circumventing issues many families experience, such as abuse, domestic disputes, divorce and financial struggle. Even

⁴¹ Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2009), 31, doi:10.2307/j.ctv11689ts.

⁴² Bernstein, “Let Black Kids Just Be Kids.”

⁴³ Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 19.

when these issues are addressed truthfully, it is often faced with pushback from the community. For instance, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007) by Sherman Alexie sought to explore themes of racial tension, domestic violence, and social injustice through the perspective of a Native American adolescent. Additionally, Alexie contrasts the pervasive, colonial mentality of childhood innocence to the traumatic childhood experienced by many Indigenous peoples. He faced backlash from parents and instructors for the novel's portrayal of mature subject matter; some institutions banned the book from being taught or read in class. When educators censor knowledge, then the notion of innocence becomes a dangerous fiction.⁴⁴

As I have traced the origins of childhood innocence which has been accompanied with a variety of visual references, I am compelled to present an image that seemingly encapsulates the commercialization of childhood innocence and what has become of its exploitation. I present: the cover art for Nirvana's second studio album *Nevermind* (see fig. 9).



Figure 9. Photographed by Kirk Weddle, *Nevermind* cover art in *Nevermind* by Nirvana, DGC Records, 1991, <https://www.discogs.com/Nirvana-Nevermind/master/13814>; photograph.

⁴⁴ Farley, 98.

This image elegantly captures the bait of capital benefit that has led childhood innocence while also exposing, literally, innocence to be desired by the spectator anyway they please. Not only does the vast pool allude to the social class in which childhood innocence is marketed, but the caucasian infant highlights the exclusion of minority groups in this myth. As Higonnet states, “Innocence, as Nirvana reminds us, turns out to be highly susceptible to commercialization.”⁴⁵

Considering the supporting and opposing arguments toward the concept of childhood innocence, we come back to the initial question that has yet to be answered: what should be done about childhood innocence?

Higonnet expresses that society must alter the Romantic child to be a “Knowing child” which would require ending the binary categorization of public and private spheres. Clearly, adults will continue to control children’s content, but the ideology must change. Adults must value children “for what they are instead of for what they are not;” adults must resist reflecting their own perceptions of what children should know and start to acknowledge what is necessary for children to know.⁴⁶ As Garlen posits, it is backwards to expand the definition of innocence to include those who have been excluded because it “ignores what is problematic about the very framework of innocence, which was built on inherently racist logic.” Innocence must be replaced with justice which requires social change that is attentive to the needs of all children.⁴⁷ In order to bolster a further understanding of the world, society must encourage the social growth of children by letting them participate in the concerns of everyday life. Robinson declares that children cannot fully comprehend what they are and what impact they have on the world when they are denied choices. Alternatively, difficult conversations must be discussed with children in order to foster a healthy development that encourages understanding subjects that are difficult to

⁴⁵ Higonnet, 194.

⁴⁶ Higonnet, 224.

⁴⁷ Garlen, 65.

comprehend.⁴⁸ Children have become subject to vulnerability as a consequence of innocence. Financial issues, multiculturalism, indigenous concerns, sexuality, poverty, environmentalism: these are all discussions that must be encouraged to have with children in order to expand their understanding of the world so that they are knowledgeable of the issues that will not only affect them when they are adults, but also while they are still children.

As I have presented the history of childhood innocence and analyzed its evolution into the twenty-first century, it is evident that there is an inherent problem with this concept. Not only has it prevented children from understanding the world they have entered, but it has excluded minority groups, as well as those in the lower-income strata, from this idealistic depiction. However, I have identified a solution for Dorfman and Mattelart's problem. Instead of innocence, society must allow children to become socially aware of their environment in order to prepare them for the issues they will face as they get older, as well as the issues they may face as children. Only then can children receive the respect they deserve and adults can freely terminate their "Disneyland Club" memberships.

⁴⁸ Robinson, 25.

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